# Transformative Power of Food: the "milk mothers" in Sri Lankan Buddhism

This article examines the role of food in the religious cosmology of Sri Lankan Buddhists, combining textual and ethnographic research and drawing on original material, including untranslated pamphlets and interviews. Looking at food as an agent rather than an instrument reveals a creative and transformative power that is tangible in individual ritual contexts. One such context is the offering of dishes rich in milk to seven "milk mothers," who are representatives of the Buddhist goddess Pattini. Despite its great popularity this ritual has so far received little scholarly attention. The milk mothers are often invited in fulfilment of a vow to Pattini who is associated with fertility, childbirth and childhood diseases, but also more generally with prosperity and health. The article demonstrates how milk is crucial for the success of this popular ritual as it creates the necessary ritual frame and, from an ayurvedic perspective, has the power to transform mothers into milk mothers.

Keywords: food, milk mothers, *kiriammā*, Sri Lanka, Theravada Buddhism, cosmology, Pattini

## I Introduction

Material culture has not yet received the attention it deserves in the area of Buddhist studies. Apart from some early ground-breaking studies (Schopen 1997, Trainor 1997) material culture has only relatively recently been looked at by Buddhist scholars (Kieschnick 2003 and Rambelli 2007).[1] So far, such studies have concentrated on sacred or special objects, but this article will look at the everyday object of food. Drawing on both ethnography and textual studies I will examine aspects of food making and food offerings, which constitute the most common expression of religiosity in Sri Lanka. Looking at food as an agent rather than an instrument shifts the viewpoint even further and reveals the creative and transformative power of food which is tangible in individual ritual contexts where it takes a "core role" (van Daele 2017, 5) and is also a

"necessary attribute of religious cosmology" (Arnold 2000, 6). Van Esterik's (1985, 95f) observations based on her fieldwork in Thailand are equally valid for Sri Lanka:

> Food is the basis for interaction with the whole range of sentient beings who populate the Buddhist cosmos—the layers of hells, the realms of animals, guardian spirits, other humans, and deities, and the dimly perceived nothingness of nirvana. The links between givers and receivers of food are symbolic, and the manipulation of these symbols is in the hands and heads of women. Food offerings create and recreate the categories for conceptualizing the order of the cosmos … By defining categories of being, and cycles of time, food interactions reinforce the total cosmology of Thai Buddhism and place women as the key social actors at the centre of Buddhist action.

I will look at one part of the Sri Lankan culinary cosmology, food offerings for seven women representing the Buddhist goddess/*bodhisattva* Pattini, who is the only female Buddhist deity in the Sri Lankan pantheon and venerated as a mother.[2] In a predawn ritual, which is often done in fulfilment of a vow to the goddess, seven women are served food rich in coconut milk that ritually transforms them into "milk mothers" *(kiriammā)*. Pattini is associated with issues of fertility, childbirth and infectious childhood diseases, but people turn to her increasingly with more general requests too. Despite their widespread popularity in Sri Lanka, "food offerings to milk mothers" *(kiriammādānaya)* have so far received little scholarly attention and have not been documented adequately. I will place these offerings into context by looking at other forms of Pattini worship, on the one hand, and food offerings to Buddhist monks and nuns, on the other. I will demonstrate how food rich in milk provides the substance of the milk mothers and is instrumental in the framing and linking of the ritual identities of the women.

## II The milk mothers in Sri Lanka

This article is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Sri Lanka in 2014 and 2017.[3] I visited Pattini shrines, interviewed milk mothers and observed and documented offerings to milk mothers in two locations. The first location was a small village in the Gampaha district (ca. 40 km northwest of Colombo) which had changed little over the years since I did my first extensive research there in 1998/99. The center consists of a railway station and a dozen or so small shops either side of a level crossing. There are two Buddhist temples, but no mosque or shrines for gods *(devāle)*.[4] On several occasions I visited a purpose built Pattini shrine in the fields about 5 km from the village. The second location was a middle-sized town within easy commuting distance of Colombo (ca. 20 km south). The population of about 20,000 is predominantly Sinhalese and there are four Buddhist temples, including a new and rather grand temple patronised largely by army personnel. Despite some new developments and industrial estates the setting is peaceful. I have conducted fieldwork in both places before and some of the people there have known me since I first started working in Sri Lanka in 1998. I also observed *pūjas* for the goddess in Nawagamuwa (20 km west of Colombo), which is best known for its shrine dedicated to Pattini and allegedly has an anklet of the goddess brought from India by King Gajabahu I (114-136 CE).

Inviting milk mothers for a predawn breakfast ceremony is very popular in Sri Lanka. There are hundreds of family videos of milk mothers on YouTube; milk mothers feature in sentimental Sinhala pop songs, and even advertising campaigns (Anchor butter and milk powder) are homing in on the "traditional value" that they represent (Udunuwara and Liyanage. 2005, 7). On 9 March 2013 Kelaniya council invited 1000 milk mothers in a very public ceremony to "invoke blessings" on the then president, Mahinda Rajapaksa.[5] Milk mothers are especially popular with women, but everyone I

talked to (not just women) knew the milk mothers and had either at some point invited them or been present at a ceremony conducted by milk mothers. Considering their popularity it is surprising that the milk mothers have not attracted more scholarly attention.[6]

Milk mothers are usually invited as a group of seven (or multiples of seven) and are said to represent Pattini in her seven incarnations: the first birth from a mango, the second from a water lily, the third from a cobra's tear, the fourth from fire, the fifth from a boat, the sixth from a drop of dew and the seventh from the thigh of Īśvara (Wirz 1954, 144, also Obeyesekere 1984, 121). A group of seven milk mothers dressed in white sarees is instantly recognizable and one might just catch a glimpse of them early in the morning when they return home from a predawn ceremony carrying parcels with food. Any other time they are just women who one might meet in the village, in the market or in the temple on full moon days. There are no data or statistics available for how many milk mothers there are in any given location. In 2014 when I conducted fieldwork in the village I realised at the ceremony that I had known four of the seven milk mothers quite well for many years without being aware that they were milk mothers. Mothers of all ages can act as milk mothers, but it is often older women and grandmothers, rather than young mothers, who dominate in the group. One milk mother I talked to, a woman in her fifties, made the point that she only became a milk mother when her children were older as it would have been too difficult to leave very small children at home in order to take part in the predawn ceremonies.

According to a popular and widely available Sinhala booklet *(Pattini dēvī pūjā sahita mahānubhāva sampanna kiriammāvarungē dānaya)*, there are twelve criteria which would render a woman unsuitable to be a milk mother. These fall into three broad categories: (1) six criteria allude to physical features (old age, weakness and needing a

stick; certain skin conditions; infertility; being blind, deaf or dumb; suffering from a disability; paralysis and epilepsy); (2) four criteria outline unacceptable behaviour (alcohol or drug addiction; being prone to lying and gossiping; working in the meat trade; prostitution;[7] finally (3) two criteria are to do with family relations (widowhood; loss of a child).[8] The image that this (negatively phrased) list of qualities evokes is simply that of an "ideal woman": married with children, physically and socially faultless. Hasheema, a young mother in the village who had invited milk mothers in fulfilment of a vow she had made when her sons were suffering from chicken pox explained:

> We choose mothers who behave well in society in their day to day life, mothers who do not slander, etc., for example. We always choose somebody who does not harm society, not even by speech, who contributes to society through good work, who is virtuous and pious.

It is possible to invite the seven milk mothers individually, but often groups of milk mothers work together under the leadership of a chief milk mother. In that case it is sufficient to invite the chief milk mother—this is done ceremonially by way of presenting betel leaves—who will then ask six further milk mothers to join her for the occasion. The chief milk mother in one of the rituals I documented in the village, an elderly lady in her seventies, told me how she became a milk mother:

> I was 22, no, perhaps 24 years when I became a mother. Only women who have had babies participate, not others. When I first became a mother, I did not have this experience. But my mother started to take me with her [to the offerings to milk mothers]. At first when I went with her I was the youngest milk mother there. After that I was always invited to offerings to milk mothers. I was invited to almost every offering to milk mothers in our area. So, I took part in them. After that I got used to the praying formula and gradually, I learnt the stanzas by heart.

Another chief milk mother, a middle-aged woman in a small town east of Colombo, told

me that she started reading books about Pattini and developed a close relationship with the goddess when she was young which manifested itself in trancelike states. She made a shrine to the goddess in her home and over time gained a reputation as a Pattini devotee in the town, which led to frequent invitations. To be invited as a milk mother is an honour but that does not mean it is to everyone's liking. I also met women who told me they had politely turned down an invitation to join a group of milk mothers.

While the growth in the number and organisation of Buddhist nuns in Sri Lanka has been well documented (Bartholomeusz 1994 and Salgado 2013) it is not easy to get a historical perspective on milk mothers as there are no data and hardly any research available. My Sri Lankan informants told me that in the past invitations to milk mothers, even though not exactly scarce, were nevertheless a much rarer event than today. They were always conducted in connection with childbirth or infectious diseases. Even though some infectious diseases such as small pox have been eradicated there are still many other infant health issues (such as chicken pox) which are considered to require divine intervention, and despite advances in midwifery Pattini is still regarded as indispensable for safe childbirth by many. Pregnant mothers and mothers of very young children (fulfilling a vow made before the birth) usually outnumber other devotees at the shrines. The rise of female employment has led to the rising age of marriage and reproduction, and Pattini is very popular with women who hope to conceive. At Sellakataragama there is a baby crib in front of the Pattini statue to which women attach coins wrapped in cloth. Milk mothers also told me that they are increasingly invited by people who hope to gain favour with Pattini with regard to their business affairs, general health and prosperity and, according to a blog (Rajaratarala 2007), milk mothers are even invited for the blessing of a cattle herd. The rise of the middle class and increased disposable income seem to have contributed to changing the *kiriammādānaya* from a

rare emergency event to a more common occasion and in some cases even into a show of political power and wealth.

**III Other forms of Pattini worship**

Buddhists venerate the goddess as Pattini in the western and southern regions of Sri Lanka and Hindus venerate her as Kaṇṇakī in the eastern and northern regions.[9] Pattini/Kaṇṇakī worship is expressed in different ways ranging from processions and temple festivals to ascetic practices and circumambulating her shrine by rolling on the ground. The most common form of Pattini worship is a *pūjā* at a shrine dedicated to the goddess. Many Buddhist temples have shrines *(devālaya)* for deities including Pattini on their premises (such as the Pattini shrine in Kandy in the vicinity of the Dalada Maligawa). There are also shrines which are predominantly devoted to Pattini, such as the shrine in Nawagamuwa, and these will also have either a *bodhi* tree or a place where *buddhapūjā* is performed. Individual *pūjā*s are often done in fulfilment of vows *(bāra)*, which can be made at anytime and anywhere and are marked by tying a coin into a white piece of cloth (Obeyesekere 1984, 45). Vows can also be made on behalf of someone else, for example parents might make a vow on behalf of their children. When the vow is fulfilled at the shrine the coin is handed to the priest. Shrines in the area are open on Wednesdays and Saturdays, so-called *kemmura* days, which are reserved for dealing with gods (Langer 2007, 73). The usual procedure at a Pattini shrine is that on arrival devotees first report to a small office at the side of the shrine to register the offerings, beneficiaries and purpose. All is duly written down in a large notebook from which the officiating priest will read later. Common offerings for Pattini are trays lined with betel leaves and piled high with seven kinds of fragrant fruit (such as mango, pineapple, banana, wood apple, beli, orange, and guava), coconuts, packets of biscuits, packets of incense sticks, incense cubes and a hundred rupee note. Sometimes milk rice

*(kiribat),* biscuits and fried cakes *(kävum)* are also offered. When the *pūjā* is about to begin the table in front of the image fills up with trays and coconuts and a priest starts to sing in a low voice waving peacock feathers over devotees, dressed in white and seated on floor mats, amongst them many young mothers and children. At the conclusion of the ceremony some devotees circumambulate the shrine three times clockwise before smashing a coconut in the designated area. Smashing coconuts *(pol gahanava)* is a multipurpose ritual that often marks a new beginning. The ceremony ends with everyone eating and offering each other fruit blessed by the goddess *(prasāda)*.

Obeyesekere devotes considerable space in his comprehensive monograph to the two large communal rituals which focus on Pattini. The first one, "hall in the village" *(gammaḍuva)*, is performed usually by a village or cluster of villages either at regular intervals or in reaction to a natural calamity, such as a drought or outbreak of disease. The second one, the "horn game" *(aṅkeḷiya)*, lasts for 15 days. The game is played with two teams, which gives villagers the opportunity to get directly involved and is described by Obeyesekere (1984, 483) as "ritual catharsis." While the first festival is still performed, the second one was becoming increasingly rare in the 1980s according to Obeyesekere but there are no data regarding the frequency of the performance now. In the present context, another annual festival for Kaṇṇakī performed on Sri Lanka's east coast is more interesting. Obeyesekere (1984, 556ff) describes the seven- or eight-day long festivities which conclude with the offering of "cooling foods," including various types of fruit, honey and milk (Obeyesekere 1984, 562). The milk boiling ceremony using dairy milk is conducted at dawn and milk rice is offered to the goddess and subsequently distributed to devotees. Obeyesekere (1976b, 203) explains:

> By recounting the history of how the goddess' anger was cooled, the community is spared from drought, and people's bodies are cooled so that the pestilence caused by the excessive bile is controlled. At the end of the rituals for Pattini, people in all

> parts of Sri Lanka eat the foods consecrated to the goddess. The most important of these cooling foods are rice cooked in milk, turmeric water, and water in margosa leaves.

Before going into more detail about how these offerings are mirrored in the offerings to milk mothers, I shall briefly sum up the Pattini myth.

**IV The myth and cult of the goddess Kaṇṇakī/Pattini**

The myth of the goddess Kaṇṇakī/Pattini was shaped between 500 and 800 CE (Obeyesekere, 1984, 3) in two classic Tamil epics: the *Cilappatikāram* which is attributed to a Jain poet prince and set in the 2nd or 3rd century CE when Indian kings promoted Buddhism and Jainism and its sequel the *Maṇimekalai* which is attributed to a Buddhist merchant prince. The epics weave together classic themes of the faithful wife, male infidelity, injustice and wrath.[10] Kaṇṇakī is the devoted wife of Kōvalaṉ, who is unfaithful and has an affair with a dancer called Mādhavī. After spending all their wealth on Mādhavī, Kōvalaṉ finally comes to his senses and returns to Kaṇṇakī. Impoverished they move to Madurai where they sell one of Kaṇṇakī's ruby filled anklets. Kōvalaṉ is falsely accused of stealing the queen's pearl filled anklet and executed by the king without trial. When Kaṇṇakī learns of his execution she proves to the king Kōvalaṉ's innocence by breaking her anklet, revealing the rubies. The king sees the error of his judgement and simply dies, while Kaṇṇakī hurls her left breast towards the city of Madurai and burns it to the ground. Only the innocent are spared and her burning anger has to be cooled. Her curse is all the more powerful due to her virtuous lifestyle and unwavering devotion to Kōvalaṉ. She then ascends to heaven and is subsequently venerated as the goddess and *bodhisattva* Pattini. The sequel of the story features Pattini as Buddhist guardian deity giving advise to Maṇimekalai, daughter of Kōvalaṉ and Mādhavī, who had entered the Buddhist order.

Unlike other deities in the Sinhala pantheon Pattini originated in the renouncer milieu in India and was conceived of as a Buddhist goddess before her cult was introduced to Sri Lanka from Kerala after the 10th century (Obeyesekere 1984, 361-380). In the process, the Pattini cult merged almost completely with cult of the goddess Kuvēṇi, also known as great "milk mother" *(mahalokukiriammalāättō)*. Kuvēṇi, who was venerated by the Veddas, the aboriginal inhabitants of Sri Lanka, became the wife of Sri Lanka's legendary first king, Vijaya, according to the chronicle Mahāvaṃsa (VII 9 ff). She is associated with seven *kiriammā,* named female ancestors and often wives of important Veddas (Seligmann and Seligmann 1911, 140) who frequent hilltops, are linked with childhood diseases, issues of fertility and prosperity and receive offerings (Parker 1909, 165). According to a Sinhala myth Pattini, too, is associated with seven demonesses (Wirz 1954, 145).[11] The myth combines various themes: fertility and agriculture (Pattini is credited in the story with bringing rice cultivation into being) and punishment (Pattini can send her seven demonesses to cause smallpox and other infectious diseases). Obeyesekere (1984, 294) claims that "Pattini and Kiri Amma are practically isomorphic: the one cult could easily have been displaced, usurped, or invaded by the other". Numerology clearly aided the merger of the myths and legends (Obeyesekere 1984, 123) and also loosely links these with the legend of the seven incarnations of Pattini, who are represented by the seven milk mothers.[12]

The main features of the various myths are present in the contemporary worship of the childless goddess Kaṇṇakī/Pattini as a mother goddess and in the offering to milk mothers: infectious diseases and illnessess caused by excessive heat and bile, fertility and prosperity, the cooling quality of milk rich foods such as milk rice, and the restorative quality of the milk boiling ceremony.

**V How is the identity of milk mothers shaped?**

The symbolism of milk (or coconut milk as substitute), its "cooling" qualities (Obeyesekere 1984, 43) and its connection with prosperity and fertility, features in many rituals (particularly the milk boiling) and is well documented (van Daele 2013b, 39).[13] The origin and meaning of the term milk mother or milk woman *(kiriammā)*, however, is neither well documented nor obvious. Obeyesekere (1984, 294) states *kiriammā* can mean "milk mother," "wet nurse" or "grandmother" and states in his brief summary of the *kiriammādānaya* that "lactating mothers" are invited. The above-mentioned booklet does not mention of lactation as one of the physical features required of milk mothers and talks generally of milk as a symbol of "prosperity, good fortune, honorability and venerability". And apart from the fact that all women at the time of giving birth lactate, the connection of the elderly women acting in the rituals I observed to milk is rather tenuous. The milk mothers I encountered were simply good, Buddhist women who have previously borne children.

Gombrich speculates, that the term *kiriammā* milk *(kiri)* mother *(ammā)* might be a misreading of the Vedda term *giriammā,* a compound of the terms *giri* (disease) and *ammā* (woman/mother), taking the term *ammā* as an honorific address for elderly women. Whatever the origin of the term may be*,* the name "milk mother" *(kiriammā)*—and by extension the name "offering to milk mothers" *(kiriammādānaya)* for the ceremony they conduct—is now firmly established . I will argue that milk plays a defining role in transforming the seven women and forging them into a group associated with Pattini.

Food had been attributed strong agency in India from the beginning of the Buddhist era and the two systems Ayurveda and Buddhism share a world view.[14] According to the former, food items are not only made up of the same elements as

sentient beings, but they have qualities (such as heating and cooling), some of which are associated with the three primordial substances, *sattva* (pure, fine, intelligent)*, rajas* (active, energetic) and *tamas* (stolid, gross) and tastes (including bitter, sweet, etc.), all of which impact on the consumer (Obeyesekere 1976a, 156). Ayurveda talks of three humours, semifluid substances present in the body: wind *(vāyu)*, bile *(pitta)* and phlegm *(kapha* or *śleṣma)*, which account for certain physical and psychological predispositions such as anxiety, anger, and greed and attachment (Scott 1994, 32f.). Obeyesekere (1976a, 159) illustrates the connection:

> For example, if a patient has temperamentally an excess of *pitta* (bile) he may be specially susceptible to physical illness as a result of his humor; he should be careful of heat-producing foods since they may raise the level of *pitta* in his body. Again, a person with predominance of *sattva* may be better able to resist mental illness from psychological shock, than a person with a *tamas* temperament.

The system of the three humours is reminiscent of the three main character types described by Buddhist systematic thinkers—greed *(rāga)*, hatred *(dosa)* and delusion *(moha)*.[15] To sum up, food does not only create the physical body, it is also at least partially responsible for certain personality traits as the taste and quality of the food items can have positive or negative psychological effects. Food and diet are, therefore, of great importance in both, Ayurveda and Buddhism, and according to White (1992, 80) "eating is tantamount to making a statement of ontological authenticity and ethical worth".

The blessed food and leftovers of food offerings have additional qualities which they impart on the consumer. They reveal much about the nature of the offering and can be blessed *(prasāda)*, dangerous (the leftovers of some healing rituals) or simply unfit for human consumption like the leftovers of a *buddhapūjā* (see also Wezler [1978] on leftover food). Seneviratne (1992, 189) explains:

> It is well known that in Hindu ritual, food is offered to the gods and is later consumed by the devotees as *prasād,* or leftovers of the offering, which contains divine substance. Food offered to the Buddha is never consumed later by the devotees. It is typically thrown away, often to be eaten by birds and animals, the commonest being crows and dogs. Unlike the leftover food of the gods, which is auspicious and affirmative of life, food offered to the Buddha or to the monks is the food of the ascetic, devoid of uniqueness of item, flavor, texture, and social origin—qualities which would have defined it as enjoyable, worldly, and life-affirming.

Blessed food and other leftovers create communities and commensality which is particularly poignant in a society where normally food goes from the "superior to the inferior" (Yalman1969, 93). A community can be of a relatively permanent nature such as the commensal community which has the Buddhist temple at its centre (Strong 1992, 52) or short lived.

How does this discussion of Ayurveda and leftovers apply to milk mothers? As mentioned above, in some rituals Pattini too receives offerings of milk rice, but there is one crucial difference between direct offerings to Pattini and offerings to the milk mothers. The former are returned to the donor as blessed food *(prasāda),* whereas the latter are exclusively for the milk mothers. Fruit and milk rice offered to Pattini pacify the goddess, but more crucially in the form of *prasāda* they transform the donor by way of healing, preventing illnesses and generally making the recipient more successful. The milk rice and other milky food offered to milk mothers primarily effects a transformation in the recipients—they transform mothers into milk mothers.[16] This is not to say that the donor remains unchanged. Milk mothers as representatives of the sevenfold Pattini *(satpattini)* effect positive change by bestowing the blessing of the goddess on the donors. Participation in the ritual, too, has an effect on the participants which can fruitfully be understood with reference to van Daele's (2013a, 50) concept of food assemblages:

> [t]he ritual food assemblage (coconuts in different shapes, coconut milk and milk-rice) emerges from the mobilisation of heat, food items, deity, spectators, myths, activities and the like. The interacting components thus co-produce and generate the ritual food assemblage and vitalise and transform it in the process of 'cooking'. In relation to the deterritorialised bubbling coconut milk, the spectator becomes temporally a component-part or ingredient and so gets transformed, at least partially. When both assemblages reterritorialise, residues such as experiences, efforts and evocations remain in the respective food and human assemblages.

I would argue that the change is not effected by way of consumption of food, because milk mothers cannot transform the food they receive into *prasāda* and neither can nuns and monks.[17] But what about leftovers? At Hasheema's offering to milk mothers (after her young sons had recovered from chicken pox), scraps of food were collected by Hasheema's sister and later placed on the roof of a shed for crows to eat much in the same way as is done on the occasion of an almsgiving for monastics. I also observed this custom at another invitation to milk mothers that was done for general prosperity and well-being. Here the mothers chanted in Sinhala "May this food be for all beings in the world!" *(siyalu loka sattvayaṭama āhārayak vēvā)* as they gave a handful of milk rice to the donor who collected scraps from the milk mothers. In both cases the food was meant for unfortunate beings and not for human consumption.[18] It seems to me most plausible that the custom found its way into the offering to milk mothers via the monastic almsgiving where this is commonly practised (See Langer 2007, 149). To sum up, the offering to milk mothers does not produce either *prasāda* or leftovers, nor is it followed by a feast for invited friends and family after the mothers have left. The mothers eat a token amount and neatly wrap up and take away the main bulk of the food (seven squares of milk rice, fruits, and sweetmeats). The milk rich food has a ritual function and is mainly for the benefit of the mothers who are transformed by the milk into Pattini's milk mothers.

**VI Offerings to milk mothers and Buddhist monastics**

The above-mentioned booklet states that offerings to milk mothers are done for a great range of reasons:

> [F]or the benefit of children and in order to get rid of various, magic enchantments, the [effects of] bad planetary constellations, diseases as well as a thousand illnesses. This is most often done to fulfil a vow previously made to the deities. But in some areas it is done annually more or less as an appeasing *(śānti)* ceremony. There is a strong belief among the people that all the obstacles such as evil-eye, evil-tongue and evil effects of envious sight and misfortunes caused by demons, ghosts, *kumbhāṇḍas,* as well as magical enchantments *(aṇa-viṇa-koḍiviṇa)* [are removed] by offering this *pūjā,* [which also] leads all one's businesses, professional and agricultural activities to utmost prosperity.

These offerings peak in the month leading up to Sri Lankan new year in April, as people want to make good on their vows before the new year begins, but they are also made at other times, irrespective of vows. Hasheema told me that in her family, apart from special occasions, the *kiriammādānaya* is also an annual event and she has very fond childhood memories of everyone in her family helping with the all-night preparations. Unlike the almsgiving for monastics, which are done any day of the week, all activity directed towards the deities is usually done on Wednesdays and Saturdays, which are the days reserved for dealings with deities. However, this is not always strictly observed and Hasheema explained that she had to move the event to Sunday as one of the milk mothers was busy on Saturday.

The evening before the ritual, family, close friends and neighbours come to prepare the front room of the house (ceiling and floor mats for seating are covered with white cloth) and help with the all-night food preparations for the special predawn breakfast. The offering is always made at the very auspicious predawn time which is associated with purity and referred to as *brahmamuhūrta*. The key food items for the

offering to milk mothers are milk rice *(kiribat)* cut in squares and a milky sweetmeat *(kiridodol),* both rich in coconut milk *(kiri).*[19] The first and biggest chore for the evening is, therefore, to produce enough coconut milk for the dishes required for the occasion (fig. 1 and 2). Then milk rice is boiled on open fires behind the house (fig. 3 and 4), while in the kitchen sweetmeats and fruit trays are prepared. In Sri Lanka food is largely the domain of women, but men lend a hand when there are major events involving big pots on fireplaces behind the house.[20] It is quite common that the same group of women or food makers meet regularly (on the occasion of weddings, funerals, almsgivings, etc.) and form a merit community. Food offered on different occasions is carefully matched to the recipient, occasion and time of the day, which requires interpretation and knowledge of Theravada Buddhism (van Esterik 1985, 95). There is also the important skill of producing large amounts of delicious food without tasting it, as tasting food is prohibited when cooking for *buddhas*, deities or milk mothers. These groups of cooks and ritual specialists pass on more than recipe knowledge to the next generation; they create and preserve a worldview and value system.

The milk mothers arrive in the early hours and often bring with them an image or statue of Pattini (just as monastics bring a relic receptacle). The ritual begins (like most religious ceremonies in Sri Lanka) with an offering to an image of the Buddha *(buddhapūjā)*. This is followed by offerings of fruits and sweetmeats to Pattini (fig. 5) and sometimes also by boiling milk in a new clay pot until it overflows (fig. 6). The milk mothers, led by the chief milk mother, chant from a stock of common Pāli chants and less common Sinhala poems. This is followed by a sermon in Sinhala delivered by the chief milk mother, similar to the sermon after the monastic almsgiving *(bhuktānumodanā)*. Half of the ceremony consists of Buddhist chants, making and giving of merit (which is the core of the monastic almsgiving). The milk mothers I met

were all very experienced chanters and the chief milk mothers were skilled preachers as well. One chief milk mother I interviewed told me that she not only modifies poems which she finds in the printed booklets but composes her own Sinhala verses. Finally, each milk mother is served seven pieces of milk rice and sweetmeat, as well as seven bananas, betel nuts and other items (fig. 7). Some of these dishes are traditional breakfast dishes and are also served to monastics at a breakfast almsgiving. But the milk mothers only eat a token amount of the breakfast dishes before wrapping all the food in a cloth to take away (unlike monastics who usually eat a good breakfast after the long fast which started at noon on the previous day). The climax of the event is the blessing of the milk mothers, who rub oil taken from the oil lamps in front of the Pattini statue, onto the heads of everyone present (fig. 8). On one occasion the chief milk mother instructed a member of the household to carry a coconut with a burning incense cube through the house before smashing it outside. Sometimes the chief milk mother blesses the house and everyone present with mango leaves dipped in water. The women leave in single file stepping out of the house backwards while continuing the blessing and sprinkling. They only turning their back to the house once they have disposed of the mango leaves. Shortly after friends and family disperse or retire for a rest.

Food is a good indicator for the cost of an event as it is often the main expense.[21] It has long been recognized that economy and religion are not neatly separated entities that can or should be treated in isolation. Wells (2006, 284) defines ritual economy as a "theoretical construct that concerns the materialization of socially negotiated values and beliefs through acquisition and consumption aimed at managing meaning and shaping interpretation". In Sri Lanka, as a general rule, bigger problems require more costly solutions, but there are also other motivations to take into account and some costly offerings seem to be motivated by the desire to assert standing in society. Inviting milk

mothers is generally cheaper than inviting monks or nuns as there is no feast afterwards, but preparing different breakfast dishes and providing presents (such as new plastic bowls) for the seven mothers is more costly than, say, taking a tray of fruit to a Pattini shrine. Worship at a shrine, too, can be more elaborate and the cost goes up when a pilgrimage is required (such as a trip to Kataragama, an important pilgrimage place in the south of Sri Lanka).

**VII How is the ritual identity of the milk mother framed?**

According to Keesing (1991, 65) the "communicative frame 'this is ritual' seems to be so basic … in our human repertoire that I am tempted to say that it is universal". In order to explore the framing of the ritual identity of the milk mothers and the role of milk in this process, I will draw on a comparison between the offering to milk mothers *(kiriammādānaya)* and the almsgiving for nuns *(bhikkhunīdānaya)* and monks *(bhikkhudānaya)*. Both milk mothers and monastics draw on the same pool of Pali Buddhist chants,[22] both are the recipients of cooked food donations (a merit generating activity) and both are treated with the same formality (e.g. ritualised washing of the feet on entering the house, offering of special seats covered with white cloth). At both types of event Sinhala sermons of varying content are delivered by the chief milk mother or most senior monastic respectively, and merit is "transferred" with the standard Pali formula ("May this be for my relatives! May the relatives be happy!"). There are, however, also important differences between the two types of event. The offering to milk mothers is usually a private affair in the home, organized by women for women, often to do with "female issues" and placing much emphasis on the maternal aspects of the deity. No guests are invited and the men who are present are either family members or close friends. The almsgiving for monastics is generally a more formal event and often done in the context of funerals and post-funerary rites with many invited guests

(men and women, sometimes dignitaries). The very public character of the event leads to more gender stereotypical behaviour (men dominate front of house and women hold back and congregate in the kitchen and backyard), and this is in my experience the case at both almsgivings for nuns and for monks. I do not wish to say that there are no differences in the way lay people relate to nuns and monks or that female monastics are completely "ungendered". As Mrozik's (2014, 77f) research shows, lay people seem to regard nuns as more virtuous *(silavat)* and more easily accessible and "close"; they appreciate that nuns conduct rituals in a cleaner *(pirisidu)* and more orderly *(piḷiveḷin, piḷiveḷaṭa)* way. My point is rather that in the formal and public context of a *sāṅghika dānaya* where monastics represent the whole *Sangha* of the past, present and future, nuns are not treated differently from monks. In contrast, the informal *kiriammādānaya*, which takes place in the privacy of the home and family, is not only domintated by females but very clearly gendered in content.

The image of the mother is very powerful and deeply ingrained in Sri Lankan Buddhism, featuring highly in scripture and contemporary chanting (e.g. Karaṇīyametta Sutta SN 143-152). And according to Bartholomeusz (1999, 213) "the Buddha as mother is a recurring theme in both the liturgy and the mythology of Buddhists in Sri Lanka" (see also Gombrich 1972). The mothers are invited individually and chosen for their lifestyle and standing in the community and become milk mothers only for the duration of the ritual. Monastics on the other hand are invited as representatives of the threefold Buddhist Sangha of the past, present and future and remain monastics permanently—at least that is the intention in Sri Lanka.[23] Crucially, there is no initiation ceremony or ordination for milk mothers, as far as I am aware, whereas for monastics there are two highly formal and ritualistic ceremonies: becoming a novices *(sāmaṇera)* and the full ordination *(upasampadā).*

The lack of ordination or initiation rituals and the absence of strong outward markers (such as robes, shaved head) necessitate a more explicit frame to transform respected mothers into milk mothers. This is particularly tangible in the village context where the women who act as milk mothers are all well-known friends and neighbours. At Hasheema's event two of the milk mothers had actually been helping during the all-night cooking: Soma is well known for her cooking skills and is often asked to cook for big events and Chuti joined the all night preparations for social reasons. The two women quietly disappeared just before the start of the ritual to change into their white sarees before re-entering the house together with the other milk mothers. The white clothing of the milk mothers is an outer sign of the purity which they exemplify; according to Beck (1969, 558) "white is a cool colour … associated with the hue of purifying (or cooling) substances such as water and milk". But what frames these mothers as milk mothers is not simply the formal dress and the formal way they are received—one might encounter these mothers wearing the same white sarees at the temple on *poya* days—but the fact that they are offered dishes rich in coconut milk. Throughout the night, as I was filming the activities in Hasheema's house and backyard, people repeatedly pointed out to me how much coconut milk is required when cooking for milk mothers and that the mothers are offered these dishes because they contain milk. A few days after the event Soma, chief cook and milk mother, talked me through the dishes for the milk mothers. Again the emphasis was on coconut milk as the key ingredient. Soma explained that other breakfast dishes can be omitted but milk rich dishes are essential:

> When there is lots of money, there are many kinds of dishes. When there is little money only two or three kinds of dishes are made. Milk rice, oil cakes and bananas. Sometimes not even sweetmeats, only oil cakes, milk rice, and bananas.

The dishes served to milk mothers were also vegetarian but that was not mentioned and clearly not part of the conscious frame. Ritual elements are often floating signifiers that take on the different meanings of different frames, and food items are no exception. The iconic savoury milk rice assumes many "meanings" in Sri Lanka: celebratory food for New Year celebrations, harvest festivals and weddings; traditional breakfast dish prepared on special occasions (e.g. birthdays) or for honoured guests (including *buddhas*). The fact that a dish of milk rice features in many different ritual contexts does not mean that its ritual function is less specific and it certainly does not mean that the recipients of the milk rice offering are in any way of a similar nature. In the specific context of the offering to milk mothers, milk rice (and if at all possible other milky food) is essential for the transformation of a mother into a milk mother. To return briefly to Keesing (1991, 67f):

> [O]ur analytical task is not simply one of deciphering encrypted structures of cultural meaning. Indeed very few participants are likely to 'understand', even unconsciously, most of the meaning encrypted. … I do not believe that rituals 'work', either for individuals or collectives, primarily because of the covert symbolic structures embedded in them. They 'work' because of the way participants think and perceive while they are in the ritual frame.

**Conclusions**

Material culture in general, and the everyday object of food in particular, provide important clues to the understanding of Sri Lankan Buddhist cosmology, which is rooted in a culture where food shapes more than physical bodies. Looking at food also throws the spotlight on the food makers who, one might argue, are religious specialists in their own right, even though they would not regard themselves as such. This article has examined one small part of the cosmology, a specific food offering to the goddess Pattini, who is represented by seven so-called milk mothers.

Looking at other forms of Pattini worship, it became apparent why dishes rich in coconut milk are instrumental in transforming the seven women into a group of milk mothers for the duration of the ritual. In the context of the Pattini *pūjā,* milk and milky dishes serve the function of cooling or pacifying Pattini's anger. The dishes returned to the donor as *prasāda* serve to create commensality and transform the congregation into a fortunate and blessed group. Milky dishes offered to milk mothers still have that pacifying function as the mothers are representative of the goddess, but they are not shared. The food offerings are exclusively given for the use of the milk mothers and make these seven mothers special. Milk in this ritual context quite simply transforms ordinary mothers into milk mothers.

A comparison of the offering to milk mothers and the almsgiving to Buddhist monastics reveal the function of food as frame and marker of ritual identity. Buddhist monks and nuns, who are, at least in theory, members of the *Sangha* for life, visibly recognizable by the shaven heads and orange robes, are representatives of a 2500-year old institution. In contrast, milk mothers are ordinary women, living in the village community, going about their everyday lives and only become milk mothers for the duration of the ritual. In the absence of any obvious markers, frequent references to and prominent presence of milk serves as frame for the milk mothers. The origin of the name milk mother may be unclear, but it provides a clue to how the frame, which is crucial for the linking of the women's identities, is constructed.

Acknowledgements:

This work was supported by the Leverhulme Trust under the British Academy Small Grant Scheme (SRG 2013-14 Round). I am grateful to the University of Bristol for providing me with a travel grant for two fieldtrips (December-January 2013–14 and September 2014) and to the Leverhulme Trust for funding a third fieldtrip in May 2014 and the production of the short documentaries. My thanks go to Indrani and Upali Perera, Nandani Amarawansha, Nanda

Senanayake (and families) for their support, and to Gayatri Wijekoon, Ms TPW Guruge, Ms P Rohini, Hasheema, Soma, Chuti and all the milk mothers I met for taking the time to talk to me. I am grateful to Rohan Bastin, Rupert Gethin, Patrice Ladwig, Mudagamuwe Maithrimurthi and the reviewers at Material Religion for their advice and comments. Any errors that remain are, of course, mine.

References:

Arnold, Philip P. 2000. "Eating and Giving Food: the Material Necessity of Interpretation in Thai Buddhism." *Journal of Ritual Studies* (14)1: 6-22.

Bartholomeusz, Tessa 1999. "Mothers of Buddhas, Mothers of Nations: Kumaratunga and Her Meteoric Rise to Power in Sri Lanka." *Feminist Studies* (25)1: 211-255.

Bartholomeusz, Tessa 1994. *Women Under the Bō tree: Buddhist Nuns in Sri Lanka.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bastin, Rohan 2002. *The Domain of Constant Excess: Plural Worship at the Munnesvaram Temples in Sri Lanka.* New York, Oxford: Berghahn.

Beck, Brenda E.F. 1972. "The Study of a Tamil Epic: Several Versions of *Silappadikaram* Compared." *Journal of Tamil Studies* (1): 23-38.

Beck, Brenda E.F. 1969. "Colour and Heat in South Indian Ritual." *Man,* New Series (4)4 (Dec): 553-572.

Danielou, Alain Daniélou 1965. *Silappadikaram.* New York: Norton & Company.

Gombrich, Richard Francis 1972. „Feminine Elements in Sinhalese Buddhism." *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens* XVI: 67-93.

Gombrich, Richard Francis 1971. "Food for Seven Grandmothers: Stages in the Universalization of a Sinhalese Ritual." *Man* (6)1: 5-17.

Kapferer, Bruce 1997. *The feast of the sorcerer: practices of consciousness and power*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Kapferer, Bruce 1991. *A celebration of demons: exorcism and the aesthetics of healing in Sri Lanka*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Berg and Smithsonian Institution Press.

Keesing, Roger M. 1991. "Experiments in Thinking about Ritual." *Canberra Anthropology* (14)2: 60-74.

Kieschnick, John 2003. *The Impact of Buddhism on Chinese Material Culture.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Ladwig, Patrice 2012. "Feeding the Dead: Ghosts, Materiality and Merit in a Lao Buddhist Festival for the Deceased." In *Buddhist Funeral Cultures of Southeast*

*Asia and China,* edited by Paul Williams and Patrice Ladwig, 119-141. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Langer, Rita 2012. "Chanting as 'bricolage technique' a Comparison of South and Southeast Asian Funeral Recitation." In *Buddhist Funeral Cultures of Southeast Asia and China,* edited by Paul Williams and Patrice Ladwig, 21-58. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Langer, Rita 2007. *Buddhist Rituals of Death and Rebirth: A Study of Contemporary Sri Lankan Practice and its Origins.* Abingdon: RoutledgeCurzon.

Mauss, Marcel 1923/24. "Essai sur le don. Forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques." *L'Année Sociologique seconde série.*

Ñānamoli, Bhikkhu. 1956. *The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga) by Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa translated from the Pāli by Bhikkhu Ñānamoli.* Colombo: R. Semage.

Nichter, Mark 1987. "Cultural Dimensions of Hot, Cold and Sema in Sinhalese Health Culture." *Social Science & Medicine* (25)4: 377-387.

Nordstrom, Carolyn R. 1988. "Ayurveda: A Multilectic Interpretation." *Social Science & Medicine* (28)9: 963-970.

Obeyesekere, Gananath 1984. *The Cult of the Goddess Pattini.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Obeyesekere, Gananath 1976a. "The Theory and Practice of Psychological Medicine in the Ayurvedic Tradition." *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* (1)2: 155-181.

Obeyesekere, Gananath 1976b. "The Impact of Ayurvedic Ideas on the Culture and the Individual in Ceylon." In *Asian Medical System: a Comparative Study* edited by C.M. Leslie, 201-226. Berkeley, London: University of California Press.

Ohnuma, Reiko 2000, "The Story of Rūpāvatī: A Female Past Birth of the Buddha." *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* (23)1: 103-145.

Panikkar. Shivaji K. 1997. *Saptamātṛkā Worship and Sculptures: An Iconological Interpretation of Conflicts and Resolutions in the Storied Brāhmanical Icons.* New Delhi: D.K. Printworld.

Parker, Henry 1909. *Ancient Ceylon.* London: Luzac.

*Pattini dēvī pūjā sahita mahānubhāva sampanna kiriammāvarungē dānaya*, Maradāna: Sänäsi Prakāśana (no author, no date).

Pruitt, William 2007. "The Career of Women Disciple Bodhisattas." *Journal of the Pali Text Society* (29): 389-405.

Rajaratala. 2007. “Kiri Amma Dana,” *Blog: Dream to Reality*, 23 November. Accessed 26 August 2018. http://rajaratarala.blogspot.com/2007/11/kiri-amma-dana.html

Rambelli, Fabio 2007. *Buddhist Materiality: a cultural History of Objects in Japanese Buddhism.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Salgado, Nirmala S. 2013. *Buddhist Nuns and Gendered Practice: in Search of the Female Renunciant.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Schopen, Gregory 1997. *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks: Collected Papers on the Archaeology, Epigraphy, and Texts of Monastic Buddhism in India.* Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press.

Scott, David 1994. *Formations of Ritual: Colonial and Anthropological Discourses on the Sinhala Yaktovil.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Seligmann Charles G. and Brenda Z. Seligmann. 1911. *The Veddas.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Seneviratne, H.L. 1992. “Food Essence and the Essence of Experience.” In *The Eternal Food: Gastronomic Ideas and Experiences of Hindus and Buddhists,* edited by R.S. Khare, 179-200. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Shulman, David D. 1980. *Tamil Temple Myths: Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the South Indian Saiva Tradition.* Princeton New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Strong, John S. 1992. *The Legend and Cult of Upagupta: Sanskrit Buddhism in North India and Southeast Asia.* Princeton New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Surendraraj, Joshua. 2014. “Thousands made happy on President’s Birthday” *The Sunday Times,* November 23. Accessed 26 August 2018. http://www.sundaytimes.lk/141123/news/thousands-made-happy-on-presidents-birthday-129268.html

Trainor, Kevin 1997. *Relics, Ritual, and Representation: Rematerializing the Sri Lanka Theravāda Tradition.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Udunuwara, Maduka and Liyanage, Uditha 2005. “Effectiveness of Traditional versus Modern Appeals in Advertising.” *Sri Lankan Journal of Management* (10)3-4, (11)1-2: 1-20.

van Daele, Wim 2018. “Vibrantly Entangled in Sri Lanka: Food as the Polymorphic and Polyphonic Assemblage of Life.” *Foundations of Science* (23)1: 85-102. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/s10699-016-9509-4.

van Daele, Wim 2017. “Food as Holographic Condensation of Life in Sri Lankan Rituals.” *Ethnos*. DOI: 10.1080/00141844.2017.1314309.

van Daele, Wim 2013a. “Igniting Food Assemblages in Sri Lanka: Ritual Cooking to Regenerate the World and Interrelations.” *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (47)1: 33-60.

van Daele, Wim 2013b. “Fusing Worlds of Coconuts: the Regenerative Practice in Precarious Life-Sustenance and Fragile Relationality in Sri Lanka.” *The South Asianist* (2)2: 97–118.

van Esterik, Penny 1985. “Feeding Their Faith: Recipe Knowledge Among Thai Buddhist women.” *Foodways: Explorations in the History and Culture of Human Nourishment* (1)1/2: 197-215.

van Esterik, Penny 1982. “Interpreting a Cosmology: Guardian Spirits in Thai Buddhism.” *Anthropos* (77)1/2: 1-15.

Wells, E. Christian 2006. “Recent Trends in Theorizing Prehispanic Mesoamerican Economies.” *Journal of Archaeological Research* (14)4: 265-312.

White, David Gordon 1992. “You Are What You Eat: The Anomalous Status of the Dog-Cookers in Hindu Mythology.” In *The Eternal Food: Gastronomic Ideas and Experiences of Hindus and Buddhists,* edited by R.S. Khare, 53-93. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Wirz Paul 1954. *Exorcism and the Art of Healing in Ceylon.* Leiden: EJ Brill.

Wujastyk, Dominik 2003. *The Roots of Ayurveda: Selections from Sanskrit Medical Writings Translated with an Introduction and Notes by Dominik Wujastyk.* 2nd revised ed. New Delhi: Penguin Books India.

Yalman, Nur 1969. “On the Meaning of Food Offerings in Ceylon.” In *Forms of Symbolic Action: Proceedings of the 1969 Annual Spring Meeting of the American Ethnological Society,* edited by R.F. Spencer, 81-96. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press.

Zysk, Kenneth G. 1998. *Asceticism and Healing in Ancient India: Medicine in the Buddhist Monastery,* Indian Medical Tradition vol. II, corrected edition. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

All photographs are by the author

Figure 1. Woman sitting on a stool scraping out coconuts.

Figure 2. Squeezing coconut milk from grated coconut.

Figure 3. Women cooking milk rice for the predawn ritual for the milk mothers.

Figure 4. Women spreading out the cooked milk rice on banana leaves.

Figure 5. Chief milk mother prepares mango leaves for the Pattini *pūjā*.

Figure 6. The milk boiling ceremony.

Figure 7. Seven milk mothers are served milk rice and other breakfast dishes.

Figure 8. Milk mothers blessing a mother and her son.

---

[1] An exception is a number of anthropological studies on food: Beck 1969, Nichter 1987, Nordstrom 1989, Ladwig 2012, and more specifically for Sri Lanka, Kapferer 1997, 1991 and van Daele (2018, 2017, 2013a, 2013b).

[2] While there are some female *bodhisattvas* in Tibetan Buddhism, references to them are fairly rare in the Pali sources of the Theravada tradition. See Pruitt 2007 and Ohnuma 2000, 103-145.

[3] I conducted fieldwork on three different occasions in Dec/Jan 2013/14, May and Sept 2014, documented food offerings and produced six short videos which are available to download (last accessed 24 April 2019): https://vimeo.com/channels/buddhistcosmologyinfood and DOI: http://data.bris.ac.uk/data/dataset/h10sdqnhz4a81tu03yj3qgk9s).

[4] See Langer 2007, 6-7 for a more detailed description. When I say Buddhist temple, I refer to the Sinhala *pansala*, which typically consists of living quarters for monks or nuns, a shrine room *(vihāraya),* a *bodhi* tree and a *stūpa*, a round structure which is said to contain relics and serves as an object of veneration.

[5] On the occasion of Rajapaksa's 69th birthday in November 2014, 1000 milk mothers were invited (Surendraraj, 2014). One of the milk mothers told me of a similar large-scale event some years earlier, when she was invited along with 150 other milk mothers by the new head of the local police station. She was quite adamant that these oversized events were a recent invention by politicians and that the correct number of mothers to invite was seven or at most 14 or 21 if the event is organized in fulfilment of two or three separate vows.

[6] Gombrich (1971) wrote a short article on the topic and Obeyesekere (1984, 294) devotes just one paragraph of his impressive volume on the *Cult of the goddess Pattini* to the ritual. More recently Van Daele (2013a, 2013b, 2017) wrote extensively on milk, milk rice and the milk boiling ceremony in Sri Lanka but does not engage with the milk mothers.

[7] Even being related to a drug addict or sex worker is listed as a hindrance to becoming a milk mother.

[8] The *Pattini dēvī pūjā sahita mahānubhāva sampanna kiriammāvarungē dānaya*) does not name an author, but others do. So far no systematic studies have been done to compare and analyse these widely available Sinhala booklets.

[9] Due to the classical emphasis of the Hindu revival which was felt more strongly in the north than in the east the Northern Province was lacking in Kaṇṇakī worship. It would be interesting to research if there are any parallels between the *kiriammādānaya* and practices for a class of south Indian deities known as Māriammaṉ who can be highly localised and linked to historical figures of exemplary women similar in this sense to the figure of Kaṇṇaki. Unfortunately, I have not been able to find any information on this.

[10] Good sources for the story are Danielou 1965, Beck 1972, Shulman 1980.

[11] Wirz (1954, 145) explains in footnote 1: "The *vaduru-yakkiniyō* are the demons mainly responsible for spreading small pox among mankind".

[12] Seven mothers or goddesses *(saptamātṛkā)* are by no means unique to the Pattini myth but are a well-known feature in Indian mythology (Panikkar 1997) as well as in iconography (Ellora cave 22) and are mentioned in a variety of sources such as the Mahābhārata and Purāṇas.

[13] The Sinhala word *kiri* has a much wider semantic field than "milk" which ranges from milk (of any mammal) and coconut milk to any milky fluid excreted from trees and fruits (e.g. mango trees and fruits); it encompasses animals of milky white colour (e.g. white crane, *kirikoka)* and finally anything that is new (e.g. milk teeth, *kiridat)* and unripe (e.g. young rice, *kirigoyama).* The connotations of *kiri* are always positive. (Mudagamuwe Maithrimurthi, personal communication.)

[14] The roots of Āyurveda which emerged as a system around the time of early Buddhism in the 5th century BCE (Wujastyk 2003, xxx) are found in the ascetic milieu. Zysk (1998, 5) argues that early Buddhists contributed to the development of medical knowledge in ancient India and that Ayurveda has affinities with the Buddhist Middle Way of avoiding the extremes of asceticism and indulgence.

[15] The 5th century commentator Buddhaghosa is not uncritical, but it is nevertheless noteworthy that the texts available to him outline the correspondence of character types and humours (Visuddhimagga III, 80f, Ñānamoli 1956, 104).

[16] Similarly, offering exclusively vegetarian dishes to the monks and nuns makes them for the duration of the ritual into vegetarians and thereby into better, more virtuous recipients and increases the amount of merit to be gained. Sri Lankan Buddhists are not as a rule vegetarian (Seneviratne 1992, 186) and the tendency to offer vegetarian food is relatively recent.

[17] Like monastics, milk mothers can be a "field of merit" and transform the offering into merit for the donor, but this is secondary in the ritual for milk mothers.

[18] Gombrich (1971, 13) briefly mentions a ritual meal provided by the milk mothers for someone who is ill, but he does not go into specifics. I have not come across any evidence for a ritual meal provided by the milk mothers.

[19] *Kiribat* and *kiridodol* are traditional festive New Year dishes which are exchanged amongst households (not just Buddhist ones) at the auspicious time of the year. One of my informants explained to me that *kiribat* is often cut into diamond shapes as it is aesthetically more pleasing.

[20] Women's role in food distribution has received some attention from anthropologists (Van Esterik 1982, Van Esterik 1985, Janowski and Kerlogue 2007, Ladwig 2012, Van Daele 2013a), but with the exception of Gombrich 1971 and van Daele 2013a, these studies mostly concentrate on Thailand and Laos, and look at the dynamics of the ritual economy and gift exchange in a specific context.

[21] For most events labour is provided by family, neighbours and friends, who expect that their favour will be returned. There are, however, some occasions which require the hire of ritual specialists, musicians or equipment.

[22] At the *kiriammādānaya* I observed Pali chanting accounted for about half the ceremony, while Sinhala songs, chants and sermons devoted to the milk mothers and to Pattini as well as blessings made up the other half. See Langer 2012 on the pool of Pali chants which are shared across Theravada countries.

[23] The host of the almsgiving does not invite individual monks or nuns but contacts the temple and requests a certain number of monastics for a particular date and time. In Sri Lanka ordination is meant for life and disrobing is still not as socially acceptable as it is in Southeast Asian Buddhist countries where temporary ordination is well respected.